

"Winning the Trust - The Spiritual Perspective"

[Retrieval, Restoration and Rehabilitation are concepts which must underlie this workshop]

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been made clear to everyone of us that the major theme of our workshop today is "Winning the Trust - The Spiritual Perspective."

The words Spiritual and Religious are interchangeably used today to refer to values which extend beyond the concern for mere bread and butter, or scanning the identity of haves and have-nots. For the total and full growth of humans here and now in this very life, something more than that is undeniably essential. For man shall not live by bread alone. What else then? The vastness and the magnanimity of the two words religious and spiritual is obviously self evident.

At the same time, it is sad to note that the significance of the word religion is fast shrinking today and is undergoing a serious metamorphosis that even heavens above would not wish to tolerate. That is why most people, while speaking of Buddhism, do not choose to apply the word religion to refer to Buddhism.

Religion has today come to be in the human community, a very powerful divisive agent. It cuts apart the people of the world, leaving them profusely bleeding to death because of the fearful battles the adherents of different religions, or even of the same religion, are involved in on that account. On account of this venomous word religion alone, what happened in places like Bosnia and more recently in Bali have not yet been forgotten or gone underground.

Religions make deep cleavages within themselves, leading to unbelievable carnage even within one brotherhood. One cannot turn one's back on or turn a blind eye to the recent findings dug out of the earth, only a few inches below the surface, during the war in Iraq, proving the reality of possible religious genocide on a mere theoretical doctrinal basis.

Religion, when coupled with communal allegiance, makes matters worse. Even what happened or was done at the World Trade Center, with its violent backlashes globally trailing behind, is adequate proof of this. These observations make us say with deep conviction that ethno-religious loyalties, whenever or wherever they surface, are undeniably a curse on mankind and are by no means a blessing.

I now turn to the first half of the title indicated in the invitation, viz. Winning the Trust. Let me ask straight away " Who is winning and whose trust are they or we endeavouring to win?" My dear members of the audience, the honest and meaningful answer shall be yours. I say the trust sought shall be mutual and shall be primarily built upon removal of distrust.

Now let me turn as a Sri Lankan [and no more and no less, please] to the second half of the title " The Spiritual Perspective." Here are my observations, based on the subject known to me for a while, on these circumstances.

As Buddhists we believe that humans, anywhere and everywhere, are a self-evolving community, without being created as a chosen group, without privileges of any sort being bestowed or even handicaps being imposed on the basis of personal selection. Ethnicity and religious loyalties, we believe are no more than accidents of time and place. Even the latest findings of the DNA research on the subject, of migration of humans throughout the globe, point in this direction. Not that we are in agreement with the whole of their findings. As religious groups, Taoists and Confucianists of ancient China and Jains and Buddhists of India antedate most others among the living faiths in the world, dating back to at least

six centuries before the birth of Christ in the world. Subsequent history in the world sees Buddhists in China as well as in Sri Lanka.

Now, without delving into the origin of human life in Sri Lanka, [and leaving it to the more globally engaged vigorous sociologists working on the subject] we find it more profitable to start from a more accepted and established point of time in Sri Lankan history. Thera Mahinda, son of Emperor Asoka of India introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Devānampiya Tissa [247-207 B.C.]. On this same occasion, Asoka sent emissaries to many other countries, both to the east and west of India like Burma and regions in the Middle East like Iran and Afghanistan. Historical and archaeological evidence discovered even today show that these countries accepted Buddhism and successfully assimilated its culture which lasted at least a few centuries until Buddhism was routed and destroyed by invading hostile religious rivals. History, both modern and ancient, of the colossal Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan, testify to this.

At the time of the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, there is evidence to believe that there were in the land several small pockets of non-Sinhalas and non-Buddhists, possibly located on the coastal fringes. As to their religion very little is known. Several primitive cults might have been in existence. Traces of Brahmanic influence are also felt. The larger majority in the country appear to have been the Sinhalas. The Chinese traveller monk Fa Hsien who visited Sri Lanka in the 5th century and Yuang Chwang who came from the same country in the 7th century, both refer to Sri Lanka as the land of the Sinhalas or Seng Chia Lo, or the Land of the Lion Progeny [Shih tse Kuo].

As elsewhere in the countries to which Buddhism made its way, in Sri Lanka too, both the rulers and the ruled gave Buddhism a very warm reception. All grades in the community offered the new religion their complete patronage. The King, almost on the third day of the arrival of the new religion, offered himself to

rule the land under the guidance of the new religion. In this context, note how remarkable it is that the Oxford University Press published in 1994 an epoch making book under the title RELIGION, THE MISSING DIMENSION OF STATECRAFT by Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson.

This is the line of new thinking now emerging in the world which within a period of less than one hundred years has witnessed the outbreak of two world wars, fought with increasing strength of unity or alliance - the first between England and Germany and the second between the Allies and the Axis. Neither the humans nor the divine seem to have felt any pinch about the horrendous effects of these acts of mass destruction, not even after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But the theme of human hostility has been recently picked up once again in the allied war against Iraq.

In the light of what we have very graphically indicated so far as to what happens at world level where humans bring disaster and endless misery upon humans without any divine commands or sanctions in support of what they do, where do we fit in with our theme of Spiritual Perspective?

The best source of inspiration towards which I can now turn with this theme in hand is Emperor Asoka's post-war policy after the massacre of Kalinga. He was not a Buddhist at the time of the war. Having seen the disaster that the war had brought upon the human kind, a sense of both guilt and repentance came upon him. A sense of unity among all people in the land as his own progeny took possession of him. In the care and concern for his subjects, he saw a unity of purpose. In Buddhism which looks upon all mankind as needing and looking up to unprejudiced and unbiased love of *mettā* or *maitrī* without any ethno-religious differences, he saw an answer.

It is such an attitude that brings law and order into society. That is why the ideal Buddhist monarch called the Cakkavatti insists that in the territories of all

his subordinates there shall be respect for all forms of life, both human and animal, respect for the legitimately owned possessions of every one, equal respect and regard for both sexes, married or unmarried, honesty at all levels of human transactions and abstention from loss of sanity and judgement among the humans through addiction to alcohol and drugs. Grievances brought about by misdeeds of man shall always be the malaise of mankind. The ideal is the growth of humans as humans, without dread and without fear from the other, near or far. That is what Asoka propagated in post-war India, using the globalised universal teaching of Buddhism.

In such a harmoniously integrated human society, brought about through the unity and cooperation of all religions in the land, there shall never be the need for political restructuring or overthrow of governments which moves all the time like the swing of the pendulum. This has to be, as we see, the product of **The Spiritual Perspective** of any religious or any ethnic group in Sri Lanka.

Professor Dhammavihari